

CHAINS OF SALVATION



OSCAR BLAINE



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Oscar Blane

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Prologue

Rain in Tokyo is never just water. It is liquid neon streaming down the windows of skyscrapers, blurring the lines between reality and reflection. In the Shinjuku district, where the light from billboards is brighter than the midday sun, it is easy to get lost—or disappear.

Akemi loved this district. Here, amid the chaos of sound and light, she felt a strange sense of calm. She was twenty-three years old, and for the past six months, she had lived with the feeling that she was learning to breathe all over again. In her bag lay a gift for her fiancé—a simple tie wrapped in kraft paper. A small thing, but for her, it was a symbol of normality. A symbol that she was making her own decisions: choosing the color, the texture, the price herself; choosing whom to love.

She stopped at the crosswalk, waiting for the green light. The crowd around her buzzed like a disturbed beehive: office workers, tourists, teenagers—everyone rushing, buried in their phones. Akemi lifted her face to the sky, letting the cold raindrops mix with the tears of joy that suddenly welled up in her eyes. She was happy—truly, without reservation.

A black minivan with tinted windows slowly pulled up to the curb. It looked like a foreign blot against the backdrop of the colorful street, like a hole in space. Akemi paid no attention to it. There were thousands of such cars in Tokyo.

The door slid open with a soft hiss of hydraulics.

“Akemi!”

The voice was painfully familiar—the voice that had sung her lullabies, taught her to read, scolded her for scraped knees. Her father's voice.

She froze. Her heart skipped a beat, then began pounding in her throat, making it hard to breathe. Her father stood in the doorway. He looked older, gaunt, but his eyes burned with a feverish intensity she had never seen before. It was not the gaze of a loving parent—it was the gaze of a fanatic, certain of his own righteousness.

“Dad?” she whispered, taking an involuntary step back. “What are you doing here?”

“Get in the car, Akemi. Now.”

It wasn't a request. It was an order. Behind her father, shadows stirred in the dark interior. She made out two more men—burly, in leather jackets, their faces devoid of expression. They didn't look like relatives. They looked like mercenaries.

“No.” She backed away, bumping into a passerby. He grumbled and moved past her. “I'm not going. I told you—”

“We're saving you!” a woman shouted from inside the car. Her mother. Her voice trembled with hysteria. “You're sick, my daughter! They've taken your mind! We just want to bring you home!”

People around them began to turn their heads. But no one intervened. In Japan, it's not customary to meddle in other people's family affairs. The scene looked like a typical argument between strict parents and a disobedient daughter.

“I’m not sick!” Akemi shouted, feeling panic clench her stomach with icy fingers. “Leave me alone! Help! Anyone!”

One of the men jumped out of the car. He moved with frightening speed and precision—no wasted motion. A lunge, a grab. His hand, hard as steel, closed around her wrist.

“Don’t make a scene, girl,” he hissed in her ear. He smelled of cheap tobacco and mint gum. “It’s for your own good.”

Akemi tried to break free, to hit him with her purse, but the second man was already there. They moved in perfect sync, like a well-oiled machine. Her feet left the pavement. The world tilted. The bright lights of Shinjuku blurred into streaks.

“Police!” she screamed, but the sound was swallowed by the slam of the door.

The click of the lock sounded like a gunshot.

Inside, it smelled of old leather and fear. Akemi was thrown into the back seat, pinned between her mother and one of the kidnappers. She saw her mother’s face—wet with tears, twisted by anguish and a kind of desperate resolve.

“Forgive us, sweetheart,” her mother whispered, stroking Akemi’s head with a trembling hand while the man tightened a plastic zip tie around her wrists. “It will hurt, but it’s necessary. We’ll purge that poison from your mind. Pastor Steven will help us. He knows how to do this.”

Akemi jerked, but the plastic bit into her skin. She looked at her father in the front seat. He didn’t turn around. His shoulders were

tense, his hands clenched tightly on his knees.

“Where are we going?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

The man beside her smirked.

“To a safe place. No phones. No windows. No way out. Just you, us, and the truth.”

The car surged forward, merging into traffic. Akemi stared at the tinted glass as her beloved city drifted past. People continued going about their business. No one noticed that a life had just been erased from reality.

She remembered what others had said—those who had managed to escape. They spoke of rooms with boarded-up windows. Of interrogations lasting days without sleep. Of screams and threats. Of how people break your will and call it “liberation.”

“The verdict of conscience,” the thought flashed through her mind. Her parents had passed judgment on her, convinced they were doing something heroic.

She closed her eyes. In the darkness of the car, amid the sound of rain and her mother’s sobs, Akemi understood one terrible truth: the most brutal violence is committed in the name of love. And there are no chains stronger than those forged from the desire to save.

The car turned onto the highway, carrying her away from the light and into a long night that seemed to have no end.

Chapter 1: The Dream of a Single Sky (1954–1970)

Seoul, May 1954. The air smells of wet ash and recent rain that has failed to wash away the soot embedded deep in the city's fabric. The war had ended less than a year ago, but the silence hanging over the Korean Peninsula still felt deceptive, ready to shatter at any moment to the whistle of a mortar shell. Amid the ruins, where the skeletons of buildings jutted out like rotten teeth, life pushed through with the tenacity of a weed. People patched roofs with pieces of rusty corrugated iron, cooked rice over fires lit right in the streets, and tried to remember what it was like to live, rather than merely survive.

A handful of people had gathered in a small, modest house in the Pukhaktong district, a place that could hardly be called a headquarters. Their clothes were worn, their faces marked by hardship, but in their eyes burned that special, frightening, yet compelling fire that is born only in the aftermath of great catastrophes.

In the center of the room sat a man who was only thirty-four years old—Moon Sun Myung. His hands, accustomed to hard labor, rested on his knees, but his voice was firm, filling the cramped space with a vision that seemed impossible in this country, torn in two by the 38th Parallel.

A document lay on a low table in front of him. The paper was cheap and yellowed, but the ink on it had not yet dried. On this day, May 1, 1954, an organization was officially registered with a name that barely fit on a single line and sounded strikingly bold for a group that had

neither a church, nor money, nor political clout: “The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity” (HSA-UWC).

To the outside world, it was just another name on the registry, yet another sect in a country flooded with preachers and shamans after the war. But for those sitting in that room, it was the moment when history itself turned. They weren’t just establishing a church. They were declaring war on the chaos, division, and hatred that had soaked their homeland in blood.

The concept Moon proposed was radical in its simplicity and painfully sincere: “One Family Under God.” In a world where brother killed brother, where the North hated the South, and where Koreans cursed the Japanese for decades of occupation, the idea that all humanity is one family sounded not like a sermon, but like a challenge. It was a response to the trauma of war. If ideologies and borders divide people, forcing them to pull the trigger, then those borders must be destroyed—not on maps, but in hearts.

One and a half thousand kilometers to the east — Tokyo, late 1960s.

Kenji Sato stood on the crowded platform at Shinjuku Station, feeling the vibration of the approaching train echoing through the soles of his shoes. He was twenty-two years old and part of a generation trying to find its place in a new Japan—a country that had risen from the nuclear ashes and was rapidly filling with neon signs and high-speed highways.

But inside, Kenji felt empty. He had inherited that emptiness, like an old watch passed down from his father, which the man had worn until his death. Kenji’s father did not die at the front; he returned—but

he returned a broken man, a silent ghost who could never forgive himself for surviving while his comrades burned in the jungles of the Philippines. The Sato family, like thousands of other Japanese families, lived in the shadow of unspoken pain and guilt.

Kenji was studying law, but the lectures seemed to him like a meaningless jumble of words. Student protests were raging all around. Radicals in helmets and wielding sticks were seizing universities, shouting slogans against American imperialism and the “rotten system.” Kenji watched them with a mixture of fear and revulsion. He saw in their eyes the same fury that had once led the world to catastrophe. They wanted to destroy the old order—but what could they offer in its place? More violence? More barricades?

One rainy evening, as he wandered aimlessly through the Jimbocho book district, trying to hide from the noise and his own thoughts, a man approached him. He was not much older than Kenji, dressed in a simple but neat suit.

“You look like a man who is searching for answers,” said the stranger. His Japanese was flawless, but a barely perceptible accent lingered in his speech.

Kenji wanted to brush him off, to walk past, as he had done hundreds of times before. But something in the man’s calm, open gaze made him stop. There was none of the aggression typical of street agitators in that gaze, nor the clingy persistence typical of salesmen.

“I don’t have any questions,” Kenji lied. “Just tiredness.”

“Tiredness is a question, too,” the stranger smiled. “It’s a question of where to find the strength to keep living.”

That was how Kenji first heard about the “Divine Principle.”

In those days in Japan, a country where the traditions of Shinto and Buddhism were intertwined with growing materialism, the emergence of a new teaching was met with wariness—all the more so because it had come from Korea, a former colony toward which many Japanese still harbored arrogance or a hidden sense of guilt.

But for Kenji, the prophet’s nationality didn’t matter. He was struck by the logic he found in the lectures. He wasn’t being told about mystical miracles, but about the structure of the universe, the causes of human suffering, and the path to overcoming it. He was told that the history of humanity is the history of restoring the lost relationship between the Parent (God) and His children (human beings).

The idea of the “True Family” struck him at the most painful place in his soul. He had grown up in a home where family was a mere formality, where a heavy silence hung over the dinner table. But here, he was offered a model of relationships based on absolute trust and self-sacrifice.

“To build peace, you have to start with yourself,” said the lecturer at a small training center in the Shibuya district. “You can’t demand peace from nations if there’s a war going on in your own family. You can’t talk about love if you can’t control your desires.”

This led to the most difficult and, at the same time, most compelling aspect of the teaching for the young idealist—a strict moral code.

In an era when the West and the East were swept by a wave of “free love,” when rock ‘n’ roll and drugs were becoming symbols of freedom,

Moon's followers chose the path of asceticism: complete abstinence from alcohol, no smoking, and—most radical of all for the youth of the 1960s—an absolute ban on premarital and extramarital relationships.

To Kenji's friends, this sounded like madness, like medieval obscurantism.

"Are you turning into a monk?" laughed his classmate Tanaka, pouring beer into glasses in a cheap bar. "You only live once, Kenji! Take everything from life while you're young. Why do you need these restrictions?"

Kenji looked at the foam in his mug, at his friend's cloudy eyes, at the cigarette smoke hanging under the ceiling, and felt a strange clarity.

"These aren't restrictions," he replied quietly. "This is hygiene of the soul. You don't drink water from a puddle so you don't get sick. So why do you let filth seep into your heart?"

He saw this code not as a restriction, but as a tool—a tool for strengthening the will. If you can control your instincts, you are free. If your instincts control you, you are a slave, even if you call it freedom.

By 1970, Kenji Sato was no longer just a listener. He had become part of the movement. He saw it growing. From a small group in Seoul, registered in 1954, the Unification Church was transforming into an international force. Missionaries were sent to the U.S. and Europe. People of different races and nationalities called each other "brothers" and "sisters"—and it was no figure of speech.

Kenji remembered his first trip to Korea. He, a Japanese man, the son of an Imperial Army soldier, stood on Korean soil. He expected hatred. He was prepared for spit in his face. But instead, he was met

with embraces. Korean church members, many of whom remembered the horrors of the occupation, wept with him, praying for forgiveness and unity.

“Borders exist only in our minds,” an elderly Korean man, whose hands were covered in scars, told him at the time. “God doesn’t see passports.”

This experience turned Kenji’s world upside down. He realized that the concept of the “One Family Under God” was not just fine-sounding words for a Sunday sermon. It was a real, tangible practice of reconciliation—one that worked where diplomacy and politics had failed.

In the late 1970s, followers were asked to describe their vision of the future. Kenji, like many others, wrote with naive but sincere enthusiasm. They believed that by the year 2000, the world would be transformed beyond recognition. They dreamed of a time when crime and war would disappear, when people would trust one another so deeply that door locks would become museum exhibits. They wrote about the abolition of passport restrictions, about how the “Divine Principle” would be studied in universities as a science of peace.

Was it a utopia? Perhaps. But it was precisely this utopia that gave them the strength to rise at five in the morning, pray for the country’s salvation, and take to the streets to tell people about hope.

However, the light they carried cast long shadows. And in those shadows, something dark was already beginning to stir.

The success of the new movement did not go unnoticed. Traditional Christian churches in Korea, and later in Japan, began to

grow uneasy. At first, it was simply bewilderment. Who was this man claiming to have received a revelation? Why were young people, who had stopped attending Presbyterian and Catholic churches, suddenly listening so intently to lectures at Unification Church centers?

Puzzlement quickly gave way to irritation, and then to open hostility. Pastors saw Moon as a rival, a threat to their influence and their flock. Accusations of heresy began to fly. Words that stung more sharply than wasp stings rained down from the pulpits: “false prophet,” “deceiver,” “sect.”

Kenji encountered this for the first time when he tried to talk to his uncle, a priest in the Anglican Church.

“You have betrayed the faith of your ancestors,” his uncle said coldly, barely glancing at the pamphlet his nephew was holding out. “You have associated with people who distort Scripture. Come to your senses before it’s too late.”

“But they talk about love and unity!” Kenji protested passionately. “They live the way Christ taught. They don’t drink, they’re faithful to their families...”

“It’s a mask!” his uncle interrupted, slamming his palm on the table. “The devil can quote Scripture, too. Their discipline isn’t holiness—it’s fanaticism.”

Kenji left his uncle’s house with a heavy heart. He didn’t understand this hostility. *Isn’t a tree known by its fruit?* He had seen the fruit: young people who had given up drugs, mended relationships with their parents, and found a purpose in life. Why, then, did the world they so desperately wanted to save greet them with such bitterness?

It was precisely during this period, at the turn of the decade, that the image began to take shape that would later become a weapon in the hands of their enemies. The closed nature of the communities, strict discipline, and absolute loyalty to the leader—all of which Kenji saw as signs of spiritual strength—looked suspicious from the outside.

A society traumatized by wars and revolutions feared any force capable of mobilizing the masses. And the Unification Church was precisely such a force. It was organized, effective, and—most terrifying of all to its critics—it was growing.

Kenji Sato stood at the window of his small apartment in Tokyo, gazing at the lights of the city at night. On the table in front of him lay a photograph of the founder. Moon Sun Myung looked out from it with the same determination with which he had looked at his first followers in that humble, war-scarred house in Seoul in 1954.

Kenji thought about the future. He believed that great deeds lay ahead of them. He believed that misunderstandings would dissipate like morning fog once people saw the sincerity of their intentions. He was ready to devote his life to building the “One Sky.”

He did not know that the dream of the sky would soon collide with the harsh reality of the earth. He did not know that sincerity would be called “brainwashing” and loyalty “slavery.” He had no idea that the very qualities he was so proud of—purity, discipline, self-sacrifice—would become counts in the indictment in the court of public opinion.

The phone rang in the next room. Kenji flinched. The sound was sharp, alarming, like a harbinger of a coming storm. He did not yet know that this storm would sweep away many destinies, and that he, a

young idealist seeking salvation, would have to endure trials never described in sacred texts.

The story was just beginning. And the first chains were already being forged—not in smithies, but in the words hurled from pulpits and in the fear that slowly, like poison, seeped into the veins of society.

Kenji picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

There was silence on the line. A long, heavy breath, and then a click. The connection was lost.

He slowly placed the receiver back on the hook. Outside the window, rain was beginning to fall—as cold and endless as it had been on the day he first heard about the man from Korea who dreamed of uniting the world. Kenji turned off the light, but the darkness of the room brought no peace. Within it, the outlines of a coming confrontation were already discernible—one in which faith would become the target and conscience the battlefield.

Chapter 2: The Crusade Against the Red Shadow (1970s)

The 1970s began not with the calendar, but with the feeling that the world was cracking at the seams. It was a decade when the Cold War ceased to be merely a metaphor from newspaper headlines and became a physical sensation hanging in the air, like the smog over the industrial districts of Osaka or Detroit. For Kenji Sato, whose youth was spent searching for a spiritual foundation, these years became a time when prayer began to demand action.

If in the sixties he had sought answers within himself, trying to patch the holes in his own soul, now the horizon had expanded to a global scale. The teaching he embraced asserted that it is impossible to build an ideal family in a burning house. And the house—this world—was indeed burning: Vietnam, Cambodia, student riots in Paris and Tokyo, nuclear parity held together by little more than fragile agreements and the fear of mutual destruction.

In the lecture halls of the Unification Church, the tone had changed. Now they spoke not only of the Fall and redemption, but also of geopolitics. Moon Sun Myung, a man who had survived the communist Hungnam labor camp, saw Marxism not merely as an economic theory, but as a metaphysical evil—a “Cain-type ideology” built on hatred and the denial of God.

For Kenji, this was a moment of truth. He remembered his father’s stories about the war, but now he saw the enemy face to face. The

enemy did not wear the uniform of a foreign army; it wore jeans, smoked on university campuses, and spoke of a revolution that would sweep the old world away.

Seoul, Yeouido Plaza, June 7, 1975.

That day went down in history as the moment when the religious movement finally emerged from the shadows of the catacombs onto the stage of high politics. The heat was unbearable. The asphalt melted beneath people's feet, the air was thick and humid, but no one left.

Kenji stood in the cordoned-off area, feeling his shirt stick to his back. A sea of people stretched out before him. It was no exaggeration—it was a true ocean of humanity. The organizers claimed there were a million participants, but to Kenji, it seemed as though all of Korea had gathered there. People sat on the scorching concrete, stood shoulder to shoulder, and held flags and banners.

“World Rally for Korean Freedom”—a global rally for the defense of Korea.

Just a few weeks earlier, Saigon had fallen. Footage of helicopters evacuating people from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam had spread across the world, sparking panic in Seoul. If America had abandoned Vietnam, would it abandon Korea? The fear of an invasion from the North was almost tangible, like the taste of yellow dust on one's teeth.

Moon Sun Myung took the podium. He did not look like a traditional pastor. He possessed the energy of a commander rallying his army before a decisive battle. His voice, amplified by powerful speakers, boomed across the square, drowning out the noise of the crowd.

“We must defend the free world from communist takeover!” he thundered, each word striking like a hammer. “If America retreats, nothing will stop its spread.”

Kenji could see the faces of the people in the front rows. There were elderly people who remembered the war of 1950, young students, and housewives. There was no religious ecstasy in their eyes in the usual sense. There was hope that someone strong, someone who wasn't afraid to call things by their proper names, would stand between them and the red menace.

At that moment, Kenji realized: they were no longer just a church. They had become a political force. And that force had chosen a side.

The organization “Victory Over Communism” (VOC) became the instrument of this struggle. Kenji, fluent in both Japanese and Korean, found himself at the center of an ideological storm. His task was to coordinate actions between the Japanese and Korean branches. It was dangerous work. In Japan, radical leftist groups such as the “Red Army” did not shy away from violence. Clashes on university campuses often ended in knife fights and Molotov cocktails.

But Kenji was not afraid. His faith gave him armor. He believed he was saving the world from godlessness.

“Communism promises equality, but it brings camps,” he said through a megaphone at the gates of the University of Tokyo, while rotten vegetables and stones were thrown at him by Marxist students. “They talk about freedom, but they build walls!”

His activities did not go unnoticed. Japanese conservatives, alarmed by the rise of leftist sentiment, saw in Moon's followers

unexpected and disciplined allies.

It was during this period that a connection was forged that, decades later, would prove fatal to the movement. Nobusuke Kishi, former Prime Minister of Japan and one of the most influential figures in the Liberal Democratic Party, took an interest in the VOC's activities. Kishi was a pragmatist to the core. He saw communism as an existential threat to Japan and the imperial system.

The meeting between Moon and Kishi was not merely a courtesy. It was a strategic alliance. For Moon, the support of such a heavyweight meant legitimacy in Japan. For Kishi, the young, ardent anti-communists were the ideal foot soldiers in an ideological war.

Kenji remembered how the police's attitude had changed. Whereas they had once viewed them as suspicious cultists, now, during anti-communist rallies, police officers would often nod to them, as if to say, "We're on the same side." It was intoxicating. It seemed that the dream of a "One Sky" was beginning to take shape through political influence.

However, Moon's ambitions extended far beyond Asia. The main battle, in his view, was to be fought in the heart of the Western world—the United States of America.

America in the 1970s was a wounded nation. The Watergate scandal had eroded trust in the government, the defeat in Vietnam had dealt a blow to national pride, and the oil crisis had emptied people's wallets. It was into this vacuum that Moon Sun Myung stepped.

His strategy was bold. Instead of hiding, he went straight to the White House.

His 1974 meeting with Richard Nixon came as a shock to the American public. The president, cornered by an investigation and losing allies every day, suddenly received support from a Korean preacher. Moon published a statement in major newspapers under the headline “Forgive, Love, Unite.” He urged Americans not to abandon their leader, but to show Christian mercy for the sake of national unity.

“This is not support for a crime,” Kenji explained to his followers in the Japanese branch when they asked why the Teacher was supporting “the liar Nixon.” “This is support for the office. God works through central figures. If America loses heart, communism will win. We must hold the line, even if the general is wounded.”

This move was political suicide from a PR standpoint, but it opened the doors to the highest echelons of power. Moon didn’t just meet with Nixon. Former President Dwight Eisenhower, and later Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush, also found themselves in his orbit. Conservative America, frightened by hippies, drugs, and Soviet expansion, was looking for a moral anchor. And Moon offered it: a strict, uncompromising ethic based on family values and patriotism.

But every coin has two sides. The louder the Unification Church’s voice grew in the political arena, the darker the clouds gathered over its reputation.

The liberal press, which until then had viewed the “Moonies” as a curiosity, began to change its tone. Journalists saw the organization not merely as a religious group, but as a powerful, well-funded political machine with a right-wing slant.

Articles with alarming headlines began appearing in major newspapers in New York, London, and Tokyo. Words like “theocracy,” “fascism,” and “secret army” flashed across the pages. Left-wing activists, sensing a threat, launched a counteroffensive. They accused Moon of “religious imperialism,” claiming he wanted to establish a world order under his control.

Kenji felt this chill firsthand in 1978. He had traveled to Europe to exchange experiences with local VOC chapters. In Germany, divided by the Wall, anti-communist rhetoric was bound to resonate. But instead of support, he encountered a solid wall of suspicion.

At a press conference in Frankfurt, a young journalist with a piercing gaze asked a question that silenced the room:

“Mr. Sato, you speak of freedom. But doesn’t your organization support dictatorial regimes in Latin America and Asia simply because they are anti-communist? Doesn’t your ‘freedom’ smell of gunpowder?”

Kenji gripped the edge of the podium.

“Freedom is impossible without responsibility,” he replied, trying to remain calm. “Sometimes you have to choose the lesser of two evils to prevent absolute evil. Communism destroys the soul. Dictatorship restricts the body. We are fighting for the soul.”

“Or for power?” the journalist retorted.

This dialogue was symptomatic. The world was beginning to divide Moon’s followers into “us” and “them” not on religious grounds, but on political ones—and this division was far more dangerous than theological disputes.

In Japan, the situation was escalating even faster. The Japanese Communist Party and the Socialist Party saw “Shokyo Rengo” (the Japanese branch of the VOC) as their direct enemy. They launched a smear campaign, using any means necessary. It was then that accusations of financial fraud began to surface in public discourse.

Newspapers wrote that Japanese church members were “cash cows” for Moon’s global ambitions. It was claimed that Japan alone provided the lion’s share of the organization’s budget. Kenji knew that many of his brothers and sisters had indeed sacrificed everything they had. They sold their homes, lived in communal housing, and worked 18 hours a day selling flowers and souvenirs. But for them, it was an act of faith, a sacrifice for the sake of building the Kingdom of God. To an outside observer, it looked like exploitation.

“They have turned religion into a multinational corporation,” critics wrote.

By the late 1970s, the Unification Church found itself in a unique and precarious position. On the one hand, it had access to the offices of world leaders. U.S. senators such as Jesse Helms and Orrin Hatch shook hands with Moon. British Prime Minister Edward Heath met with representatives of the movement. Military figures, such as Alexander Haig, NATO’s Supreme Commander, spoke approvingly of their anti-communist resolve.

On the other hand, an image of the enemy was taking shape on the streets and in the media—an image of a mysterious, alien force that manipulates politicians and brainwashes young people.

Kenji Sato, having returned to Tokyo after a European tour, felt exhausted. He sat in a small office in the Shibuya district, sorting

through stacks of flyers for the next demonstration. Outside, rain was falling, washing the dust off the neon signs.

There was a knock at the door. A young man, one of the new recruits, walked in. His lip was split, and his jacket was torn.

“What happened?” Kenji jumped up.

“The students from Zengakuren,” the young man wiped the blood off with his sleeve. “They ambushed us at the subway. They were yelling that we’re fascists. That we’re CIA agents. They tore up all the flyers.”

Kenji walked over to the window. Down below, in the light of the streetlamps, the city went on with its life. People were hurrying to bars, to the movies, home. They didn’t notice the war that was already raging on their streets—a war for minds, for the future.

“That’s a good sign,” Kenji said quietly, though his heart tightened with anxiety. “If they’re attacking us, it means we’re a threat to evil. If we were nothing, they wouldn’t even notice us.”

But he was wrong about one thing. It wasn’t just their enemies who had noticed them. They had been noticed by those looking for a scapegoat. By those who feared change. And by those who were ready to use parents’ fear of losing their children as fuel for the bonfire of a new inquisition.

Political activism, meant to save the world, became the very red flag that enraged the bull of public opinion. Moon Sun Myung challenged the “red shadow,” but the shadow responded by changing its form. Now the threat came not only from communism. It came from the very system they were trying to protect.

In Washington, Congressman Donald Fraser was already preparing hearings intended to “expose” Moon’s activities. In Japan, lawyers sympathetic to the left were beginning to compile dossiers. And in Germany, Pastor Friedrich Haak was already writing his first pamphlets, in which the word “sect” rang like a sentence.

Kenji looked at his student’s split lip and, for the first time, felt not resolve but a cold pang of fear. Not for himself—but for the realization that their sincere desire to save the world could be used against them.

“Go wash up,” he said. “Tomorrow will be a new day. And a new battle.”

He didn’t know that the next battle would be fought not in public squares with megaphones, but in closed rooms with boarded-up windows, where the only weapon would be human will set against psychological coercion. The crusade against communism had turned them into targets. And the hunters were already loading their guns.

A fresh copy of the newspaper lay on Kenji’s desk. The headline read: “Who Is Really Controlling Your Children?” The article wasn’t about politics. It was about fear. And that fear sold better than any other ideology.

In the shadow of geopolitical giants—Nixon, Kishi, Brezhnev—a new industry was emerging. An industry that didn’t need nuclear missiles to destroy people. It needed only words. And those words had already been spoken.

Kenji turned off the lights in the office, but the darkness brought no relief. In it, he saw not peace, but the silhouettes of trials to come. The red shadow receded, but another shadow took its place—gray,

faceless, and merciless. A shadow that would soon engulf thousands of lives, turning faith into a diagnosis and devotion into a crime.

Chapter 3: The Birth of the Fear Industry (Mid-1970s)

The mid-1970s brought a strange, cloying silence to the suburbs of America and Europe. It was not the silence that follows a storm, but the one that comes before an earthquake. In well-kept homes with perfectly manicured lawns, behind the closed doors of living rooms where television screens flickered in the evenings, fear had taken root. It was not linked to a nuclear threat or an economic crisis. This fear was far more intimate, gnawing away at people from within. It concerned their children.

A generation that had grown up in postwar prosperity suddenly began to disappear. Young people—students at prestigious colleges, promising engineers and musicians—were dropping out of school, leaving their parents' homes, and joining communities that the older generation knew only from alarming newspaper headlines. They were giving up careers for missionary work, comfort for asceticism, and their accustomed individualism for a collective cause.

For their parents, this was incomprehensible. How could their son, a straight-A student and the pride of the family, voluntarily get up at five in the morning to pray for the salvation of the world? How could their daughter, who dreamed of becoming a doctor, sell flowers on the streets to raise funds for the movement?

Within the familiar logic of materialism and social success, there was no explanation for this.

And so society demanded an answer that would absolve it of responsibility. If a “normal” person could not choose such a path voluntarily, then there was no choice: it meant that something violent, invisible, yet irreversible had occurred.

Thus was born a concept that would determine the fates of thousands of people for decades and become the foundation of a new industry—the industry of fear. The name of this concept was “brainwashing.”

The Anatomy of a Diagnosis

In the early 1970s, in San Francisco—the epicenter of countercultural upheaval—psychologist Margaret Singer began to formulate a theory that became a lifeline for desperate parents and a weapon for ideological opponents of new religious movements.

Singer, drawing on the work of William Sargent and Robert Jay Lifton, reinterpreted ideas about mind control that had originally been used to analyze the behavior of prisoners of war in Korea and China. However, she made a conceptual leap that had enormous consequences. Methods describing physical and psychological pressure in totalitarian camps were extrapolated to religious groups operating in a free society.

The key premise of Singer’s theory was seductively simple: traditional religions are a choice, while “cults” are a disease. She claimed that new movements use sophisticated psychological techniques capable of suppressing a person’s will, undermining their critical thinking, and turning them into obedient robots.

To parents, this sounded like music to their ears. This explanation absolved them of any blame. Their children had not rejected the values

of the “consumer society” in which they had grown up. They were not rebelling against the hypocrisy of their elders. No, they had become victims. They were sick. And if a person is sick, they must be treated—even if they themselves do not want to be.

In academic circles, Singer’s theories were met with skepticism. Scholars pointed to the lack of empirical evidence, noting that the percentage of people who remained in new movements after being introduced to them was negligible—a fact that contradicted the notion of “inevitable brainwashing.” But the voice of science was drowned out by the clamor of parental panic.

The term “brainwashing” migrated from psychiatrists’ offices to kitchens and courtrooms. It became a universal master key. Why does a young man pray for hours? Brainwashing. Why doesn’t a young woman want to see her parents, who insult her? Mind control. Complex spiritual quests, the crisis of growing up, and sincere religious experiences—all of this was reduced to a mechanistic process of “programming.”

Steven: The Birth of the “Savior”

In this atmosphere, a new type of hero emerged—the “ex.” A person who had been “there” but had returned.

Steven sat in a chair across from a married couple in an expensive New York hotel. He was just over twenty, but his eyes betrayed the weariness of a man who had lived several lifetimes. The parents across from him trembled—with hope and fear. Their son had disappeared into a “cult” six months earlier.

Steven knew what to tell them. He had been through it himself. For several years, he had been a devoted member of the Unification Church. He believed, worked, and prayed. But then something broke. Or, as he now claimed, he had been “awakened.”

Steven’s story was a classic example of how the apostate narrative works. After leaving the movement, he faced a void. He needed to explain to himself and those around him why he had spent years of his life on what he now considered a mistake. Admitting that he had sincerely believed and then become disillusioned was too painful. It would mean acknowledging his own responsibility for his choice.

The “brainwashing” theory gave him the perfect alibi. “I didn’t choose this,” he told himself and others. “I was programmed. I was a victim.”

This stance not only healed his wounded ego but also opened up a new career path. Steven became a professional “exit consultant.” He turned his experience into a commodity.

“Your son isn’t listening to you,” he told the parents, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper. “The person you knew has been suppressed. Right now, a cult personality lives inside his body. It’s useless to argue with it; you can’t convince it with logic.”

“What are we supposed to do?” the mother cried, clutching her handkerchief.

“We have to break the shell,” Steven replied harshly. “We have to create conditions in which he will be forced to listen.”

He never uttered the word “abduction.” He used euphemisms: “rescue operation,” “intervention,” “deprogramming.” But the essence

remained the same. Steven, convinced that he was saving people from mental slavery, was himself becoming a jailer.

He believed that the end justified the means. If a person is drowning, you don't ask for permission to pull them out of the water by their hair. Steven saw himself as a rescuer on the bank of a raging river. But the water in that river was metaphorical, and the violence he was preparing to use was very real.

In the mid-1970s, the figure of the deprogrammer took on a heroic aura. People like Ted Patrick (nicknamed "Black Lightning" for his methods), and their followers, such as Steven, were seen as modern-day exorcists. They expelled not demons, but ideas. And their fees rose in proportion to parental hysteria.

The European Front: A Pastor with a Card Index

While in America the fight against cults took on the characteristics of a Hollywood action movie with chases and covert operations, in Europe it took the form of a bureaucratic machine.

In Munich, in an office cluttered with files and brochures, worked a man whose influence on the fate of religious minorities in Europe is difficult to overestimate: Pastor Friedrich-Wilhelm Haak. A representative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, he looked like a respectable bourgeois, but his activities took on the character of a crusade.

Haak was the architect of European anti-cultism. While Americans relied on psychology and emotions, Haak relied on structure and the state. He understood that effective struggle required organization.

It was through his active involvement that the “Elterninitiative” (Ei)—the “Parents’ Initiative”—emerged in Germany. This was the first sign of things to come. Soon, similar organizations began popping up all over Europe like mushrooms after acid rain. In the UK, FAIR (Family Action Information and Rescue) was established—a group whose name sounded noble (“Fair”), but whose methods raised increasing concern.

Haak created a classification system. He compiled lists. In his files, any group deviating from the mainstream was labeled a “Jugendsekte” (youth sect) or a “Destructive Cult.” He wasn’t just gathering information—he was shaping public opinion.

His methods resembled the work of Walter Künneth’s “Apologetic Center” in the 1930s, though few drew direct parallels at the time. Haak used the authority of the traditional church to marginalize his competitors. He appeared on television, wrote articles, and advised politicians.

“The state must not stand idly by while our children’s souls are being stolen,” he declared from the podium.

Under his influence, a unique climate of intolerance began to take shape in Europe. Here, “brainwashing” was viewed not merely as a psychological phenomenon, but as a threat to public order. Haak and his like-minded colleagues skillfully played on German guilt and fear of totalitarianism, paradoxically using methods reminiscent of the very systems they opposed to combat “totalitarian sects.”

Parent committees, such as Ei and FAIR, became focal points for hostility. Their meetings had the atmosphere of a besieged fortress. Parents exchanged rumors that, repeated over and over, turned into “facts.” They spoke of secret camps, hypnosis, and drugs. The more

terrifying the lie, the more readily it was believed—after all, it justified any action taken to “save” the children.

Linguistic Assassination

But the most powerful weapon in this war was neither the abductions nor Haak’s lists. It was language itself.

In the mid-1970s, the word “Moonie” became firmly established in the vocabulary of the average Westerner.

At first glance, it was simply derived from the founder’s surname. But phonetically and semantically, it carried a destructive charge. In English, it rhymed with “loony” (crazy, insane) and evoked associations with something frivolous, caricatured, and, at the same time, sinister.

It was a classic example of dehumanization. By calling a person a “Moonie,” society denied them their individuality. They ceased to be John, Hans, or Kenji. They became part of a faceless mass—an interchangeable “ant” in an anthill.

The media picked up the term with enthusiasm. Headlines screamed: “The Moonies Are Coming,” “The Moonies Stole My Daughter.” American historian Daniel Boorstin once remarked: “Nothing is real unless it happens on television.” For millions of viewers, the followers of the Unification Church became real precisely in the image of “brainwashed Moonies.”

Propaganda operated according to principles described by Edward Bernays: a minority shaped the consciousness of the majority, channeling its fears in a desired direction. The image of the enemy was painted with broad strokes. The technique of “guilt by association” was employed. When the Jonestown tragedy unfolded in Guyana (though

slightly later—the specter of fanaticism was already in the air), its shadow fell indiscriminately on all new religious movements.

Steven, when counseling parents, actively used this language.

“You must understand,” he said, “this is not your child standing before you. It is a shell filled with Moon’s ideology. As long as you see them as a person, you are vulnerable.”

It was a terrifying permission: permission not to regard another person as an equal; permission to ignore their rights, their desires, their faith. After all, a “zombie” has no rights. A “victim of mind control” has no free will. And that means violence against them is not violence—it is framed as treatment.

The Price of Salvation

By the late 1970s, the fear industry had fully taken shape. It was a market where demand (parental anxiety) generated supply (the services of deprogrammers and anti-cult experts).

Prices for “salvation” skyrocketed. Deprogrammers demanded tens of thousands of dollars per operation. This sum included surveillance, renting “safe houses” (in reality, private prisons), paying for security (often former police officers or private detectives), and the consultant’s fee.

Parents mortgaged their homes, took out loans, and spent their retirement savings. They paid for the hope of getting their “old” child back. No one offered guarantees. If deprogramming failed, the blame was placed on “too deep a brainwashing” or on the claim that the parents had sought help too late.

Organizations like FAIR in Britain and Ei in Germany provided this business with public legitimacy. They lobbied for laws and pressured the police to turn a blind eye to the abductions of adults.

“It’s a family matter,” the police would say, turning away as yet another young person was shoved into a van in full view of passersby.

In this framework, the law gave way to moral panic. The presumption of innocence was replaced by the presumption of guilt applied to the “cult.” Freedom of religion was reinterpreted as the freedom to believe only in the “right” gods.

The Point of No Return

Steven stood by the window of his hotel room, looking out at the city at night. On the table in front of him lay a folder—her file: photographs of a young woman, her schedule, and a floor plan of the building where she lived.

Tomorrow morning, they were supposed to “take” her.

He felt the familiar rush of adrenaline. Deep down—somewhere very deep—a flicker of doubt stirred. He remembered his own days in the church. He remembered the sincerity of the prayers, the warmth of the community. He remembered that no one had held him there by force. But he quickly suppressed those memories.

“It was an illusion,” he told himself. “The euphoria of hypnosis. I have to save her, just as I was saved.”

He convinced himself that he was acting out of love. But his actions were more like those of a surgeon amputating a limb without anesthesia than those of a loving brother.

He turned to the girl's parents. They were sitting on the sofa, pale, exhausted from sleeplessness.

"Everything is ready," Steven said. His voice was firm, professional. "Tomorrow we'll return your daughter to you. But you must be prepared for anything. She'll scream. She'll curse you. She'll pray. Don't listen. It's not her speaking. It's the cult."

The girl's father nodded, clenching his fists.

"We're ready," he said hoarsely. "We'll do whatever it takes."

At that moment, there were no villains in the room. There were only people convinced they were right—people ready to commit a crime in the name of good. And that was precisely what made the situation truly terrifying.

The fear industry was now operating at full capacity. The mechanism had been set in motion, its gears lubricated by mothers' tears and pseudo-scientific theories. The theory of "brainwashing" had become a license for violence.

On Steven's desk, next to the kidnapping plan, lay a fresh issue of the newspaper. The front page carried an article about the "growing threat of cults." Society had given its approval.

Steven turned off the light. Tomorrow, the hunt would begin. And he—a former victim—would become the chief hunter, unaware that the chains he believed he was breaking were merely changing hands, becoming heavier and colder.

In the darkness of the room, the air seemed to thicken. It was the breath of an impending tragedy that would soon knock on the doors of

thousands of homes, turning family dramas into battlefields where no prisoners are taken and souls are broken to save them.

Chapter 4: Behind Closed Doors

Time flowed differently in the apartment with the boarded-up windows. It was not measured in hours or minutes, but had turned into a viscous, murky substance—a succession of cycles of screams, silence, and the blinding light of electric lamps that never went out.

Akemi woke up on the floor. The first thing she sensed was the smell—a mixture of old dust, cheap lavender-scented air freshener, and the sharp, animal stench of fear that seemed to have seeped into the very walls. She tried to move, but her hands were bound behind her back with a plastic tie. The plastic dug into her wrists; her skin burned.

She lifted her head. The room was small, typical of a residential neighborhood, but devoid of any personality. The furniture had been pushed against the walls, the rugs removed. The windows were covered with thick sheets of plywood nailed directly to the frames. Thin rays of daylight filtered through the edges of the plywood, but there wasn't enough to tell whether it was day or night.

A man sat in the corner on a chair. Not the one from the car—someone else. A large man with a bull-like neck and a bored expression. He flipped through a magazine, chewing gum. On the small table beside him sat a walkie-talkie and an ashtray full of cigarette butts.

“Mom?” Akemi called hoarsely. Her throat was parched, and her tongue felt foreign. “Dad?”

The door to the next room opened. Her father walked in. He wasn't wearing a jacket; his shirt sleeves were rolled up, his tie loosened. He

looked as if he had spent three straight days in the office before submitting an annual report—his face gray, his eyes red, his hands trembling. But beneath this exhausted appearance there was a frightening determination.

“We’re here, Akemi,” he said, without coming close. He stopped two meters away, as if afraid of catching something. “We won’t go anywhere until you come back to us.”

“I’m here, Dad,” she tried to sit up, leaning against the wall. “Untie me. This is madness. This is a crime!”

“A crime is what they did to your brain,” her father’s voice broke into a shout, but he immediately regained control. “You’re not Akemi. You’re a shell. A program. We’re here to delete that program.”

Following her father into the room came a man whose presence immediately changed the atmosphere. Steven. Unlike her nervous father and the bored guard, he exuded the icy calm of a professional. He wore a comfortable sweater and jeans and held a folder of documents. He looked at Akemi not as a person, but as a complex mechanism to be taken apart and reassembled.

“Hello, Akemi,” he said, his voice soft and almost therapeutic. “My name is Steven. Your parents asked me to help. I know what you’re feeling right now—fear, anger, betrayal. That’s normal. It’s a defensive reaction of your cult personality.”

“I’m not a cult personality!” she shouted, struggling in her restraints. The guard lazily looked up from his magazine, ready to intervene, but Steven gestured for him to stop. “I’m an adult! You have no right!”

Steven crouched down in front of her, keeping a safe distance.

“Rights?” he smiled sadly. “Akemi, you have no rights because you have no will. You’re a puppet. Your thoughts aren’t your own. Your feelings are implants. We’re not in a courtroom—we’re in an operating room. And we won’t stop until the tumor is removed.”

Thus began a process that, in their language, was called “deprogramming,” but in reality was a prolonged, methodical form of psychological torture.

The Structure of Disorientation

The first twenty-four hours were devoted to disorientation. They wouldn’t let Akemi sleep. As soon as her head began to droop toward her chest, a guard—there were two of them, rotating every six hours—would come over and shake her by the shoulder or blast loud music. It was heavy rock or dissonant jazz—music she hated.

She wasn’t allowed any privacy. Even in the bathroom, her mother accompanied her, leaving the door open. Humiliation was part of the method. Steven explained to the parents:

“Shame is a social construct. The cult suppresses the individual, replacing it with a collective ‘we.’ To restore the ‘I,’ you have to break down barriers—even the most intimate ones. She must feel like a small, helpless child, completely dependent on you.”

Her mother cried, standing in the bathroom doorway, while Akemi tried to preserve what little dignity she had left.

“Just listen to them, sweetheart,” her mother whispered. “Just agree. It will all be over as soon as you say yes.”

“I can’t betray God, Mom,” Akemi replied, staring at the tiled floor.

“It’s not God!” her mother shrieked, her voice laced with hysteria fueled by sleeplessness and fear. “It’s a Korean millionaire! It’s the devil!”

On the second day, the “educational phase” began. Akemi was seated on a chair in the center of the room. Steven set up a TV in front of her.

“Do you think you’re unique?” he asked, inserting a cassette into the VCR. “Do you think your experience is a spiritual revelation? Watch.”

Images flashed across the screen: clips from news reports, interviews with “ex-members” filmed in similarly dark rooms, and propaganda films produced by anti-cult organizations. Voices off-screen spoke of “brainwashing,” financial fraud, and sexual orgies (things Akemi had never seen and had never even heard of in her community).

“That’s a lie,” she said, turning away.

The guard roughly grabbed her chin and forced her face toward the screen.

“Watch,” Steven ordered. “You must see the truth. Your ‘Messiah’ is a fraud. Your ‘brothers and sisters’ are victims just like you.”

The videos ran for hours. The same phrases were repeated over and over, driving themselves into her mind. “Mind control.” “Deception.” “Slavery.” Steven commented on every clip, using terminology developed by Margaret Singer and Robert Lifton. He rattled off terms: “love bombing,” “information control,” “mystical manipulation.”

He was convincing. To someone deprived of sleep, hungry, and frightened, his logic began to seem ironclad. He took Akemi's sincere feelings—her desire to serve the world, her love for God—and dissected them, reducing them to base motives or hypnotic suggestion.

"You didn't choose this path," he said monotonously, pacing the room. "You were lured in. Remember when you first came to them. Were you tired? Lonely? They exploited your weakness. This isn't faith, Akemi. It's technology."

At some point, Akemi caught herself thinking that she was beginning to doubt—not God, no, but her own memory. Had she really been happy? Or had she been made to believe she was happy? Sleep deprivation was blurring the line between reality and suggestion. Her brain, desperate for rest, was ready to accept any version of reality—as long as it would make this nightmare stop.

The Price of Salvation

In the next room—the kitchen—another drama was unfolding. Akemi's father sat at a table littered with empty pizza boxes and coffee cups. Across from him sat Steven's assistant, a young man with a calculator.

"We need to extend the equipment lease and pay for another security shift," the assistant said matter-of-factly, sliding the bill toward him.

The father looked at the numbers and rubbed his temples. The amount was enormous. It was money he'd set aside for retirement, plus a loan he had taken out against his house just a week earlier.

“Steven said it would take two or three days,” the father said hoarsely. “It’s been four already.”

“The resistance is deep,” the assistant shrugged. “She’s been in the cult for three years. Do you really want to cut corners when it comes to your daughter?”

It was a forbidden tactic, but it worked every time. The deprogramming industry thrived on parents’ guilt. If you don’t pay, it means you don’t love her. It means you’re leaving your child in the clutches of “monsters.”

“No, of course not.” The father pulled out his checkbook. His hand was shaking. “But are there any guarantees?”

Steven appeared in the kitchen doorway. He looked refreshed, despite the sleepless nights. He seemed to feed off the energy of conflict.

“There’s only one guarantee,” he said, pouring himself coffee. “We won’t stop. Look at the Helander case. Have you heard of Wendy Helander?”

The father shook his head.

“It’s a classic,” Steven took a sip of coffee, staring at the wall as if reading from invisible tablets. “Wendy’s parents—Elton and his wife—fought for her to the very end. They kidnapped her once, hired Ted Patrick. It didn’t work; she ran back to the cult. Do you know what they did next? They didn’t give up. They kidnapped her again. Held her for three months. Three months, Mr. Tanaka. They kept moving her from state to state to stay ahead of the police.”

“Three months?” the father asked, horrified. “And that helped?”

“She ran away again,” Steven admitted, without a trace of embarrassment. “But her parents did everything they could. They spent forty thousand dollars, went into debt, fought in court. But they were trying to save her mind. You have to be ready for that kind of commitment. This is war. And in war, you don’t count bullets.”

He didn’t mention that Wendy Helander had later cut ties with her parents for good, saying she loved them but could never trust them again. He didn’t mention that the judge dismissed their lawsuit, finding no evidence of “control.” For Steven, the Helander story was not a tragedy of a broken family, but a model of parental heroism—and a justification for prolonging the “sessions” indefinitely.

The father signed the check. Steven nodded with satisfaction and returned to the room where Akemi sat, bound. The business continued.

The Breaking Point

On the fifth day, Akemi’s reality finally cracked. She could no longer tell where she was. The faces of her parents, Steven, and the guards blurred into a single menacing mask. It seemed to her that the walls were pulsing, closing in with the rhythm of her heartbeat.

Steven had moved into to a phase of aggressive confrontation. He was no longer a gentle therapist. He shouted, looming over her, spittle flying.

Steven had moved into the phase of aggressive confrontation. He was no longer a gentle therapist. He shouted, looming over her, spittle flying.

“Admit it!” he roared. “Admit that Moon is a liar! Say it! Say that your ‘True Family’ is a fiction!”

“No...” she whispered. Her voice was barely audible. Her lips were cracked from dehydration.

“They’re using you! You’re nothing but meat to them! A sex slave!” He hurled the most degrading, most shocking accusations, trying to trigger emotional collapse. “Do you even know what they do to people like you?”

He pulled out photographs—images from Nazi concentration camps. Victims of mass suicides. They had nothing to do with the Unification Church, but in Akemi’s fevered mind, these images began to merge with the faces of her friends.

“This is your future!” Steven thundered. “Do you want to die? Your parents want you to live!”

Akemi began to cry. It was not a cry of relief, but a dry, barking sound that tore out of her chest in spasms.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, looking at her mother, who sat in the corner. Her mother covered her face with her hands. “Mom, why are you letting him?”

“We love you!” her mother cried out, not lowering her hands. “We’re saving you!”

At that moment, Akemi understood a terrible truth no newspaper would ever print. Deprogramming was not a dialogue. It was a violation of the soul. They didn’t want to hear her. They wanted her to stop being herself and become the convenient, familiar child she had been five

years earlier. They didn't love her—they loved their projection of her. And to preserve that projection, they were ready to destroy a living person.

Steven noticed the change in her eyes. They had gone vacant, glassy. This was the moment deprogrammers called “snapping”—the point at which the mind, unable to withstand the pressure, shuts down critical thinking and becomes ready to accept anything, just to make the pain stop.

“Untie her hands,” Steven ordered.

The guard cut the plastic ties. Akemi didn't move. Her hands fell limply onto her knees.

“Akemi,” Steven leaned closer, looking straight into her eyes. “Do you want this to end?”

She nodded slowly.

“Then say it. Say you were wrong. Say you want to go home.”

The words stuck in her throat. Betray what had given her life meaning? Betray the God she had found? But the pain, the exhaustion, the terror were stronger. The instinct for self-preservation—ancient, animal—rose up inside her.

“I...” she began.

“Louder!” Steven barked.

“I want to go home,” she whispered.

Silence fell over the room. Her mother rushed to her, embracing her, soaking her dirty shirt with tears.

“Oh, thank God! Thank God! You’re back!”

Her father stood against the wall, breathing heavily. He looked ten years older, but his eyes shone with triumph. They had won. They had brought their daughter back.

Steven stepped toward the window and lit a cigarette, even though the air in the room was already suffocating. He felt the satisfaction of a craftsman who had completed a difficult job. He didn’t see a broken person. He saw results. He saw the check already in his pocket.

But Akemi had not returned. The Akemi who loved the rain in Shinjuku, who had chosen a tie for her fiancé, was gone. Inside her, a black, scorched emptiness had formed. She embraced her mother because her body craved warmth—but her mind was cold, lifeless.

She remembered a term Steven had used repeatedly: “Stockholm syndrome.” The irony was that now she felt it not toward the “cult,” but toward her “rescuers.” She was grateful to them for stopping the torment. She was ready to say anything—anything at all—if only they would let her sleep.

This was not freedom. It was surrender.

Echoes of Violence

The next day, she was taken to another place—a “rehabilitation center,” which was in fact a rented cottage in the mountains. The regime had softened. They let her sleep and fed her properly. But Steven continued his sessions, reinforcing the “success.”

Now he worked more subtly. He made her write letters to her former friends, in which she had to “expose” their delusions. He made

her rehearse a statement for court, in case church members tried to file a kidnapping claim.

“You have to say you went willingly,” he instructed. “That you needed time to think. If you say it was kidnapping, your parents will go to jail. You don’t want your father to go to jail because of you, do you?”

That was the final nail in the coffin. Emotional blackmail disguised as love. Akemi realized she was trapped with no way out. If she told the truth, she would destroy her parents’ lives. If she lied, she would destroy herself.

She chose to lie.

One evening, when her parents were already asleep and Steven was drinking whiskey on the porch, Akemi went into the bathroom. She looked at herself in the mirror. A stranger stared back at her. Pale skin, dark circles under her eyes, dull hair. But the most terrifying thing was her eyes. There was no life in them. Only the vacant stillness of a mannequin.

She remembered Wendy Helander. The girl who had been kidnapped twice. The girl who had escaped. Akemi thought about running away. The bathroom window wasn’t boarded up. It was the second floor. There were bushes below. She could jump.

But her legs wouldn’t obey. The fear instilled in her over those five days had paralyzed her will. Steven had convinced her that nothing awaited her outside this house except deception. That her faith was a disease.

She turned on the water to drown out her sobs.

Downstairs, in the living room, lay the contract signed by her father. It listed a sum equivalent to the cost of a good car. Under “Services,” it read: “Exit counseling.” Not a word about violence. Not a word about restraints. Not a word about how a person was broken like a dry branch.

Legally, everything was above board. Morally, it was an abyss.

Steven, having finished his cigarette on the porch, looked up at the stars. He felt like a hero. He sincerely believed he had saved another soul. He didn’t realize that what he had actually created was not a free person, but someone broken, someone who would flinch at the sound of a closing door and fear her own thoughts for the rest of her life.

He returned to the house, passing by Akemi’s room. He heard running water and quiet sobbing, but didn’t stop. Tears were part of the process. “Healing is painful,” he told himself.

A folder containing the file on his next target lay forgotten on the table. A young man, a violinist who had left the conservatory to become a missionary. His parents had already paid the deposit. Tomorrow, Steven would begin studying his schedule. The machinery of “salvation” could not stop.

Akemi turned off the water. She dried her face with a towel that smelled of the same cheap lavender air freshener. She knew that tomorrow she would have to smile and thank her parents for “saving” her. She knew she would have to live with this lie.

She returned to the bedroom, lay down on the bed, and stared at the ceiling. In the darkness, she thought she heard Kenji’s voice

speaking about “One Family.” But the voice was faint, distant—as if coming from another world.

“Forgive me,” she whispered into the void.

There was no answer. Only the creaking of floorboards in the hallway, where the guard stood watch, and the heavy breathing of the sleeping house, which had become her prison—and her grave.

On the nightstand beside the bed lay the gift she had never given her fiancé—a tie wrapped in kraft paper. Now it was just trash. An artifact from a past life that had ended the moment the door of the black minivan slammed shut.

Akemi closed her eyes, sinking into a dreamless sleep—a sleep close to death—while outside, people continued to speak of human rights, freedom of conscience, and democracy, unaware that in thousands of similar locked rooms, those words were being ground into dust beneath the boots of those who had claimed the right to decide what others were allowed to believe.

Chapter 5: The Japanese Trap (1980s–2011)

Tokyo greeted Elizabeth not with the neon glitz usually sold to tourists, but with the gray, oppressive geometry of concrete. By the early 1980s, the economic miracle had transformed Japan into a technological giant, but behind the façade of corporate success and social harmony lay a mechanism whose grinding could be heard only by those who pressed their ears to the ground.

Elizabeth sat in the archives of a small law firm in the Chiyoda district. Before her stood stacks of files, each one someone's life compressed into the dry lines of police reports and court documents. She had come expecting to see a continuation of the American story—the emotional outbursts of parents, the spontaneous actions of “cowboy” deprogrammers. But what unfolded before her in the documents was different. It was not chaos. It was a system: cold, calculating, and chillingly efficient.

While in the U.S. and Europe, the fight against “cults” often took the form of public hysteria, in Japan it took on the characteristics of a corporate enterprise with a clear hierarchy, division of labor, and, most disturbing of all, an unspoken license from the state.

The Creators of the System

The turning point came in 1987. It was then that scattered groups opposing the Unification Church and other new religious movements

consolidated into an organization known as the National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLSS).

Elizabeth studied the organization's founding documents. On paper, their goal appeared noble: protecting consumers from fraud. The term "spiritual sales" (reikan shōhō) became their battering ram. The network's lawyers claimed that religious organizations intimidated people with bad karma or ancestral spirits in order to pressure them into purchasing expensive religious items.

However, as Elizabeth waded through the legal casuistry, she saw a fundamental substitution of meaning. The fight against financial irregularities (which, of course, could exist in any large organization) became merely a pretext. The true aim was the destruction of faith itself. NNLSS had created a unique ecosystem in which the "salvation" of the victim became a conveyor belt producing plaintiffs.

The scheme worked flawlessly. Parents, frightened by media campaigns, turned to the Network's lawyers. They, in turn, referred them to "exit counselors"—most often Christian pastors—who took on the "dirty work" of physical confinement and psychological coercion. Once the victim broke down and renounced their faith, they were immediately drawn into legal action against their former church, demanding compensation. Part of that compensation was used to pay for the services of those same lawyers.

It was a vicious cycle, a perfect perpetual motion machine of conflict, fueled by human lives and spewing out millions in legal fees.

The Price Tag

Elizabeth unfolded the financial statement attached to one of the closed cases. The figures made her whistle under her breath. In Japan, “saving a soul” had a very specific price list—and it was astronomical.

Unlike Western deprogrammers, who often worked for fees of a few thousand dollars, Japanese “specialists” operated with sums comparable to real estate values.

The name Takashi Miyamura—one of the most well-known “consultants”—appeared in the documents. During a court hearing in June 2013 (materials already available to Elizabeth as part of her retrospective analysis), Miyamura was forced to admit receiving money. Officially, he described the sums as modest, but witness testimony painted a different picture.

Kiyomi Miyama, a woman who had survived two abductions, provided details that were chilling. Miyamura’s average fee was around 4 million yen (approximately 31,000 euros at the time). But this was only the tip of the iceberg.

Elizabeth found Sayuri Hara’s notes. The young woman described how her parents regularly handed over envelopes of cash to pastors and counselors. Her mother’s diary included an entry about borrowing the equivalent of 30,000 euros from relatives.

“They’re selling their homes,” Elizabeth whispered, reading the testimony of one victim’s father. “They’re taking out loans, sinking into debt they’ll never be able to repay.”

It was a cynical business model. Parents paid for the rental of “safe apartments” (in reality, private prisons), as well as round-the-clock security, food, and transportation—and, of course, a “success fee” for

the pastor. According to the human rights organization Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), millions of dollars flowed through accounts linked to deprogramming every year.

The involvement of the United Christian Churches of Japan (UCCJ) appeared especially cynical. Elizabeth uncovered evidence that a portion of funds extracted from the “saved” (or, more accurately, broken) individuals was funneled into the organization’s coffers. Pastors who succeeded in “reprogramming” their targets received a double reward: money and a new, fanatically devoted parishioner who now rejected their past and was ready to serve their new authorities.

Pastors with Handcuffs

In Europe and the U.S., deprogramming was often carried out by former police officers or opportunists. In Japan, this role was assumed by clergy—giving the violence an aura of sanctity.

Elizabeth studied the file of Pastor Yoshiomi Shimizu. In 1993, during hearings at the Maebashi court, he described his methods with disturbing candor.

“Did you confine followers?” the judge asked.

“What is the definition of ‘confinement’?” the pastor deflected.

“Locked windows, hidden shoes, surveillance...”

“There were such cases,” Shimizu admitted. “There were times when it was necessary.”

“Necessary.” That word ran like a red thread through all the testimony. Pastors like Matsunaga of Niigata or Takazawa did not see themselves as criminals. They saw themselves as surgeons removing a

cancerous tumor. The fact that the “patient” screamed and begged for help was, to them, merely a symptom of the disease.

The case of Y.H., a pregnant woman abducted in 1997, became for Elizabeth a stark illustration of the absolute moral distortion of these “saviors.”

Y.H. had come from Korea to visit her parents. They were waiting for her. The apartment in Niigata had been prepared in advance: windows sealed with plastic, doors secured with chains and padlocks. Even the bathroom door was fixed so she could not lock it from the inside.

Pastor Matsunaga visited regularly. He and a group of former members conducted hours-long “counseling” sessions. Y.H. was five months pregnant. She begged to be released, saying the stress was killing her baby.

The response from her cousin—a nurse who had participated in the abduction—made Elizabeth close the file and step outside for air.

“If you admit your mistake and agree to an abortion,” her cousin said, “I’ve found a doctor who will perform it—even at this stage.”

The suggestion to kill the child in order to “save” the mother marked the line where religion ended and pure cruelty began. Y.H. broke. She signed every document, listing the “twelve errors” of the doctrine—anything to save her unborn child.

Twelve Years of Silence: The Case of Toru Goto

Among thousands of cases (by 2012, human rights advocates had documented approximately 4,300 instances of forced confinement),

one stood out for its sheer duration: the case of Toru Goto.

Elizabeth met him in a small café. Toru looked older than his years. His movements carried the caution of someone who had spent too long in confinement.

His story stretched across decades, becoming a symbol of the Japanese trap. He had been abducted multiple times. But his final confinement lasted 12 years and 5 months.

“Twelve years?” Elizabeth asked, unable to believe it. “In prison?”

“In an apartment,” Toru corrected her quietly. “In an ordinary apartment in Tokyo: first in one, then in another.”

His family, guided by professional deprogrammers, decided not to release him until he renounced his beliefs. It became a war of attrition. Toru went on hunger strikes—three times: 21 days, 30 days, 31 days. His body wasted away, but his spirit refused to yield.

“They shouted at me,” he said, staring into his teacup. “They brought in former members who had renounced their faith. They made me watch videos. But that wasn’t the worst part. The worst part was time. You watch the seasons change through a crack in a sealed window. You hear the world moving on. And you’re frozen. You’re an object placed on a shelf, waiting.”

He was released only in February 2008—not because his parents relented, but because his body was on the verge of collapse, and his captors feared he might die, turning a “family matter” into a criminal case.

But the real shock came afterward. Believing in justice, he filed a criminal complaint. The case seemed clear: twelve years of unlawful confinement, witnesses, medical records, a location.

On December 9, 2009, the Tokyo District Prosecutor's Office refused to open a criminal case "due to insufficient evidence."

Elizabeth read the decision, and the words blurred before her eyes. "Insufficient evidence"—when a living person had lost twelve years of his life?

It was a signal. The state was saying, "We will not intervene."

In Japan, there was an unspoken doctrine of "non-interference in family affairs." If parents beat a child, it is called discipline. If parents lock up their adult son for 12 years, it is called concern for his soul. The police, the prosecutors, the courts—all of them were part of a silent collusion.

A Police Officer with a Business Card

This collusion was not passive. It was active and deliberate.

Elizabeth found the testimony of Kozue Terada, who was abducted in 2001. Her story revealed the mechanics of interaction between the "holy fathers" and those in uniform.

When Kozue, locked in an apartment with her relatives and Pastor Takazawa, tried to reach the phone and call the police, the pastor simply laughed.

"Even if a police officer comes," he said, taking out his wallet, "as soon as he realizes the case involves the Unification Church, he'll cooperate with me."

He laid five or six business cards on the table—police officers' cards.

"I have connections," the pastor explained calmly. "They'll tell me, 'Keep up the good work.'"

This was no bravado. The data supported his claim. Out of thousands of abduction cases, only a handful ever reached police intervention—and in most cases, the police returned the victim to their parents, recommending that "the matter be resolved within the family."

Elizabeth realized she was dealing with institutionalized discrimination. The label "Moonie" in Japan meant civic death. A person bearing that label was effectively stripped of legal protection. They could be abducted, beaten, raped (as in the case of a woman whose father took his own life out of shame after discovering that the deprogrammer he had hired had been raping his daughter for months), and the system turned a blind eye to it.

An Intellectual in a Trap: January 1, 2011

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the methods of deprogrammers had become even more sophisticated. They had learned to target not only the young, but also established individuals—intellectuals whose social status, one might assume, would offer protection.

A.Y.'s story became the culmination of Elizabeth's investigation of this period.

A.Y. was not a naïve teenager. She held a Ph.D. in environmental studies and worked at a prestigious research institute. A woman with a critical mind, a career, and a reputation.

She was abducted on January 1, 2011—the day when Japan celebrates Oshōgatsu, visits temples, and gathers with family.

“My mother invited me to a family dinner,” A.Y. recalled in an interview with human rights advocates. “I suspected nothing. In a family like mine, the idea of abduction seemed absurd.”

But her family was no longer “ordinary.” A.Y.’s mother attended the Shinjuku Western Church (UCCJ), where she met Pastor Kimiaki Nishida, a specialist in “mind control.” She had undergone four preparatory consultations with Takashi Miyamura—the same man whose fees reached into the millions.

She had been prepared in advance. She was instructed how to lure her daughter in, how to lock the doors, how to ignore the screams. Her daughter’s intellect, academic degree, and achievements were all dismissed as the result of “cult influence” or treated as irrelevant.

A.Y. found herself trapped in a mechanism that snapped shut with mathematical precision. Her status as a Ph.D. did nothing to open the locked door. Her knowledge of ecology was useless against brute force and psychological coercion.

This case showed Elizabeth that the trap was universal. Anyone could fall into it. The deprogramming system in Japan had reached a level where it could process and break down any human being.

The Mechanism of Hate

Analyzing the collected data, Elizabeth began to see a structure resembling an octopus.

The head of this octopus was an ideology imported from the West, but transformed and radicalized on Japanese soil. The ideas of Walter Kunneth and Friedrich Haak about “destructive cults” found fertile ground here. Japanese society, with its emphasis on conformity and unity, perceived any deviation as a threat.

Its tentacles were a network of institutions:

1. **NNLSS (Lawyers):** provided legal cover and created financial incentives through litigation.

2. **Protestant churches (UCCJ and others):** supplied personnel—pastors acting as deprogrammers—and theological justification for violence.

3. **The media:** fueled moral panic, publishing sensational stories about “lost children” and demonizing victims.

4. **Police and courts:** ensured a climate of impunity by refusing to intervene.

The victim was trapped in a vacuum. Outside—a society that rejected them. Inside the family—parents who “saved” them through violence. Within the legal system—a wall of indifference.

Elizabeth came across the term “social death.” This was precisely what happened to people even before they were abducted. First, they were destroyed in newspapers and television, stripped of their humanity. And then, when they were physically locked in apartments, society breathed a sigh of relief: “At last, they’re being treated.”

The Economics of Suffering

But the most cynical discovery for Elizabeth was the financial underpinning. The fight against cults was extraordinarily profitable.

She found reports detailing how artificial plaintiffs were created. A person was broken through deprogramming, forced to sign a power of attorney granting authority to>NNLSS lawyers, and lawsuits were then filed in their name. The money obtained—whether through court rulings or pretrial settlements—was divided among the participants in the scheme.

It was an industry feeding on human suffering. Parents lost their savings. Victims lost years of their lives and their mental health. The church lost its reputation and resources. The only ones who profited were the intermediaries—lawyers and “consultants.”

Elizabeth recalled the words of one expert: “If you want to understand the essence of the anti-cult movement in Japan, forget theology. Look at the bank accounts.”

The Point of No Return

By 2011, the situation seemed hopeless. The system functioned without friction. There were 4,300 victims—the population of a small town—who had vanished into the black holes of “safe apartments.” And silence. The world said nothing. The U.S. State Department, in its reports on religious freedom, mentioned the problem only cautiously, unwilling to pressure a key ally in Asia.

Elizabeth closed the last folder. Outside the office window, darkness had fallen. Tokyo lit up—millions of small suns pushing back the night. But she knew there was a darkness that electricity could not dispel.

She thought of Toru Goto, who had watched the world through a crack for twelve years. Of the pregnant Y.H., who had been blackmailed with her child's life. Of Dr. A.Y., whose intellect had been crushed on New Year's Day.

The Japanese trap was terrifying not because of its cruelty—cruelty exists everywhere. It was terrifying because of its ordinariness. Violence had become routine, a service one could order over the phone, like pizza delivery.

Elizabeth gathered the documents into her bag. She understood that her investigation was not merely a chronicle of past crimes. It was a warning. The machine created to suppress one group had not disappeared. It was simply waiting for new fuel.

A copy of a newspaper clipping lay on the table. In the photo, a well-known politician smiled as he shook hands with a representative of the>NNLSS. It was a photograph from the 1990s. But Elizabeth knew those connections had not vanished. They had gone underground, grown stronger, and intertwined with the state apparatus.

She stepped outside. The rain had begun again, a light drizzle washing away the dust—but not the sins of the city. In her coat pocket was a ticket for the high-speed train. She needed to meet one more person. Someone who understood that history does not end in archives. It ends either in repentance—or in blood.

And in the air of Japan, thick with electricity and unspoken grievances, there was already the scent of a coming storm—one that would break a decade later, when the echo of a gunshot in Nara would shatter the silence and force the world to confront what would erupt

from the Pandora's box so carefully constructed by lawyers, pastors, and silent police officers.

But for now, the city slept, lulled by the illusion of order, while in hundreds of apartments across the country, people prayed for freedom, staring at boarded-up windows beyond which life went on—a life in which they had no place.

Chapter 6: The Echo of a Gunshot (2022 – Present)

On July 8, 2022, the air in the city of Nara was thick and humid, foreshadowing an imminent rain that ultimately failed to wash away what was about to happen. Shinzo Abe, the man whose name had been synonymous with Japanese politics for the past decade, stood on a small platform at Yamato-Saidaiji Station. He spoke of the future, of the economy, of a strong Japan. A small crowd had gathered around him—a common scene during an election campaign. Security guards scanned the perimeter, but their eyes swept over the crowd, searching for threats in the conventional sense: radicals with placards, hecklers, perhaps a thrown stone.

No one noticed the unremarkable man in a gray T-shirt and cargo pants standing behind them, clutching a strange object wrapped in black electrical tape. The device resembled a crude, garage-made weapon, and it was precisely this crude simplicity that made it so deadly.

At 11:30 a.m., the first bang rang out. It was loud but strange, like a firework explosion or a bursting tire. Abe didn't fall. He turned, a look of mild confusion frozen on his face, as if trying to understand who had disrupted the speech. The security guards hesitated for a split second—the very fraction of time that separates life from history.

The second shot was different. It sounded like flesh and metal being torn apart. A dense cloud of white smoke enveloped the former

prime minister. When it cleared, Shinzo Abe was already lying on the asphalt, his white shirt rapidly turning crimson.

At that moment, as paramedics fought for the politician's fading pulse and police tackled the shooter, Tetsuya Yamagami, no one yet understood that this shot was aimed not merely at a man. It was aimed at the social fabric of Japan. The bullet, cast in a crude mold, pierced not only the former leader's heart but also the dam holding back an ocean of resentment that had been building for decades.

Elizabeth watched the news broadcast from her hotel room in Tokyo. She saw the chaos, the tears of the anchors, the shock on the faces of passersby. But her professional instinct, honed by years of investigation, caught a strange note in the cacophony of the first reports. Normally, after an attack, the focus centers on the perpetrator—who he is, what his motives are, and who he is connected to. But here, within hours, the narrative began to shift.

Yamagami, apprehended at the scene, did not shout political slogans. During his first interrogation, he stated: "I have nothing against Abe's political views. I killed him because he was connected to a religious group that destroyed my family."

This statement became a detonator. In any other case, the words of a man who had calmly shot someone in the back would have been treated with skepticism. But here, they fell on prepared ground—ground cultivated for decades by lawyers from the>NNLSS, deprogramming pastors, and tabloids.

Within 24 hours, the unthinkable happened. The victim—Shinzo Abe—faded into the background. The real target of the media attack

was no longer the man who pulled the trigger, but the organization he blamed. The Unification Church, which had existed in Japan for decades under constant criticism, suddenly found itself at the epicenter of a public outrage storm.

Elizabeth watched as a mechanism unfolded that could only be described as information opportunism. Left-wing political forces and Abe's long-time opponents, unable to defeat him at the ballot box, saw in Yamagami's act a rare opportunity. They did not justify the murder outright—that would have been political suicide. Instead, they did something subtler: they “understood” the killer.

Television screens filled with experts. Many of them were representatives of the very National Network of Lawyers Against Spiritual Sales (NNLSS), whose activities Elizabeth had studied. They were no longer fringe activists—they had become the primary interpreters of reality.

“Yamagami is a victim,” they said during prime time. “His mother donated everything to the church. He grew up in poverty. What he did is terrible—but he was driven to desperation by a system that Abe supported.”

It was a striking and disturbing inversion. The perpetrator was recast as a tragic antihero, an avenger of a “stolen childhood.” Meanwhile, the murdered politician and a religious organization he did not even belong to (Abe merely sent video greetings to events organized by affiliated NGOs, as many world leaders have done, including Donald Trump) were positioned as the true culprits.

A period began in Japan that future historians may call the “Great Witch Hunt of the 21st Century.”

The media landscape was flooded with stories from so-called “shukyō nisei” (second-generation believers). Their accounts of strict upbringing, financial hardship, and alienation were broadcast with little verification and no balancing perspective. Any family conflict within a Unification Church household was now interpreted exclusively through the lens of a “dangerous cult.”

Elizabeth saw how the mechanism worked. Journalists were no longer searching for truth; they were seeking confirmation of a predetermined narrative. If a believer said they were happy, their voice was cut—or dismissed as the product of “brainwashing.”

But the most alarming part was the state’s response.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), long led by Abe, entered a state of panic. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, whose approval ratings began to fall under the pressure of media outrage, made a decision many analysts would later describe as a fatal sign of weakness. Instead of defending freedom of conscience and distinguishing between an individual crime and a lawful religious organization, he announced a purge.

Kishida demanded that all LDP members review and sever any ties with the Unification Church. The move echoed political purges of the McCarthy era or the Cultural Revolution. Almost anything could qualify as a “connection”: an interview, attendance at an event, or volunteer support during an election.

Politicians who had recently accepted support from conservative voters among Moon's followers now publicly distanced themselves, as if from something contagious. This was not merely a betrayal of individuals—it was a betrayal of democratic principles. A segment of Japanese citizens—law-abiding taxpayers—was effectively declared “toxic,” and engagement with them became politically dangerous.

Elizabeth met with a young parliamentary aide at a café in Ginza. He looked exhausted, constantly glancing around.

“You don't understand,” he whispered, stirring his cold coffee. “This isn't about facts. It's about survival. If the media finds even one photo of my boss at an event linked to the Federation for World Peace, his career is over. We've been ordered to erase these people from our lists, ignore their calls, return their donations.”

“But that's discrimination,” Elizabeth objected. “It's a violation of the Constitution.”

“The Constitution?” he gave a bitter smile. “These days, the Constitution is written on talk shows. Society wants blood. And we give it blood—so it doesn't tear us apart.”

The events of 2023 marked the culmination of this government campaign. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), driven by public pressure and the cabinet's plummeting approval ratings, launched an unprecedented investigation. They invoked the “right to ask questions” (*shitsumon-ken*)—a provision that had never before been applied with such aggressive scope.

The Church was inundated with thousands of questions. It was required to account for every yen, every decision made over decades. This was a bureaucratic siege—not intended to uncover the truth, but to manufacture grounds for action.

And those grounds were found. Or, more precisely, constructed.

On October 13, 2023, the Tokyo District Court granted the government's request to dissolve the religious corporation. Elizabeth studied the ruling carefully. It was a legal distortion that overturned fundamental principles of law.

Previously, in Japan, dissolving a religious organization required proof of systematic criminal activity by its leadership. This had been the case with Aum Shinrikyo after the subway gas attack. But in the case of the Unification Church, no such criminal charges existed. None of its leaders had been convicted of violence or fraud.

The government resorted to a legal maneuver. It argued that civil lawsuits for damages could serve as grounds for dissolution—the very lawsuits that had been built over years by the>NNLSS network using testimony from individuals who had undergone deprogramming.

The circle was complete. Victims of abduction, broken in confined apartments, provided testimony that was now used by the state to dismantle the entire organization.

MEXT Minister Masahito Moriyama stated: “The church's actions were clearly recognized as significantly harmful to the public welfare.”

Elizabeth read these words and saw behind them the shadow of Walter Kunneth and Friedrich Haak. The concept of “public welfare” had become a blunt instrument—capable of crushing any minority.

Who defines this welfare? The public? The media? Or lawyers whose income depends on litigation?

The dissolution did not formally ban belief—individuals could still pray. But it stripped the organization of its legal status, tax privileges, and property rights. It was economic suffocation. It sent a clear message: “These people are unprotected. They can be targeted.”

The consequences were swift. Elizabeth began receiving reports of everyday discrimination that seemed inconceivable in a modern, developed country of the twenty-first century.

In Osaka, a city council denied volunteers the right to clean a park simply because some were church members. In Nagoya, a woman was dismissed from her job after her employer discovered her religious affiliation through social media. Schoolchildren faced organized boycotts.

“We cannot openly practice our religion,” representatives of the Family Federation stated on October 16. “We are labeled an ‘anti-social group.’ We are denied access to venues for worship.”

This was social erasure. The label “Moonie,” coined in the 1970s, had now been effectively stamped with state authority.

Yet outside Japan, the situation was viewed differently. Elizabeth held a printout of the 2023 International Religious Freedom Report issued by the U.S. Department of State. Diplomatic language is typically restrained—but even here, concern was unmistakable.

American officials noted what much of the Japanese media avoided. The report explicitly referenced pressure from legal advocacy

networks, “biased and hostile” media coverage, and documented cases of denial of services.

“The unfolding events in Japan represent one of the most serious crises of religious freedom in a democratic country in the 21st century.” A phrase once heard in conference corridors was now echoed in official documentation.

The paradox was stark. Japan—a G7 nation proud of its democratic institutions—was employing methods more commonly associated with authoritarian systems to marginalize a disfavored group. And it did so with broad public approval.

Elizabeth understood that Abe’s assassination had been a catalyst, not a cause. The machinery of hostility had been assembled long before. Yamagami had simply activated it.

In her investigation, she uncovered a disturbing parallel. The methods used to demonize the Unification Church in Japan closely resembled those observed in other violent contexts.

The concept of “puzzle coding” appeared repeatedly in her sources—a process by which fragmented media narratives shape a distorted perception of reality, capable of inciting violence. Yamagami was not born a killer. His anger had been shaped, focused, and directed. He believed he was saving society by eliminating a perceived threat.

The pattern repeated elsewhere. Elizabeth examined reports of the attempted assassination of Robert Fico in Slovakia in May 2024. The attacker, Juraj Cintula, like Yamagami, acted under the influence of sustained media framing, viewing the prime minister as a danger to democracy.

She also reviewed footage from the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in Pennsylvania, where a young man—Thomas Crooks—appeared similarly influenced by polarized rhetoric.

Though these events occurred in different countries, the pattern was consistent: the construction of an image of “absolute evil,” the dehumanization of opponents, and the framing of violence as an act of “rescue.”

In Japan, this culminated in Abe’s assassination—and in the subsequent collective stigmatization of an entire religious community.

“This is the third force,” Elizabeth wrote in her draft. “A force that needs no armies. It uses journalists, lawyers, and lonely, lost individuals with homemade weapons. It reshapes reality, turning neighbors into enemies.”

By the end of 2023, the situation in Japan had reached a boiling point. Left-wing forces, including the Japanese Communist Party, openly declared their “final war” against the movement. For them, it was revenge for their defeats in the Cold War. Sun Myung Moon and his followers, who had played a key role in containing communism in Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, were now being destroyed by the instruments of the capitalist state—courts and media corporations.

Elizabeth met with Akemi—the very woman whose abduction story she had studied earlier. Akemi had aged; gray had begun to appear in her hair, but her eyes remained clear. They sat in a small park, away from prying eyes.

“You know what’s the scariest thing?” Akemi asked, watching the children play. “It’s not that they’re dissolving the church. It’s that the

killer has won. Yamagami got what he wanted. He wanted to destroy the church, and the state did it for him. Terror worked.”

It was a verdict on the entire system. If the assassination of a political leader leads to the fulfillment of the killer’s demands, then democracy is dead. It means violence becomes an effective tool of political pressure.

“They say they’re protecting victims,” Akemi continued. “But who will protect us from the state? My son came home from school in tears yesterday. The teacher told the class that our faith is an ‘anti-social virus.’ Is my child a virus?”

Elizabeth didn’t know what to say. Before her sat a woman who had endured the hell of deprogramming in her youth, survived, preserved her faith—and now, decades later, found herself under siege once again. Only now, the walls of her prison were not plywood, but public contempt.

That same evening, Elizabeth stood outside the Tokyo District Court. The building appeared monumental, an unshakable symbol of justice. But now she knew that behind those walls, justice had been sacrificed to political expediency.

She took out her phone and opened a photograph taken on July 8, 2022. Plumes of white smoke on a street in Nara. The echo of that shot had not faded. It had become a barrage, eroding the very foundation of freedom of conscience.

In her bag lay a plane ticket. She needed to leave to finish her book. But she knew she was leaving Japan in a state of deep moral sickness. A country that had feared religious “brainwashing” so intensely had failed

to notice how it had itself undergone a form of mass ideological conditioning—convincing itself that freedom could be defended by taking it away from a minority.

A notification flashed on her phone. Another headline: “Kishida’s approval rating hits a historic low.” The political sacrifice had achieved nothing. By abandoning its allies, the LDP had not secured forgiveness. It had only shown a lack of resolve.

Elizabeth put her phone away. Rain began to fall—a cold autumn rain striking the pavement like thousands of tiny gavels delivering a verdict. But this verdict had not been issued in a courtroom. It had been written in the streets, in editorial offices, and in the hearts of people who had allowed fear to triumph over conscience.

She recalled the words from the State Department report: “The most serious crisis.” It was not merely a diplomatic formulation. It was an epitaph for an era when human rights were considered universal. Now they had become a privilege reserved for the “right” citizens.

Elizabeth raised the collar of her coat and stepped into the darkness of the Tokyo night. Ahead lay the final chapter—an attempt to tie all the threads together and understand where the roots of this hatred truly lay. She knew the answer lay not in modern Japan, but in Europe’s darker past, where a German theologian had once begun compiling lists of “undesirable” believers.

But that would come later. For now, silence hung over Tokyo, broken only by the sound of rain and the invisible yet palpable hum of a machine grinding human lives in the name of the “public good.”

On the rain-soaked pavement lay a discarded newspaper. The headline, blurred by water, read: "Dissolution is inevitable." Beside it lay a fallen ginkgo leaf—like a small golden heart—crushed beneath the steps of indifferent passersby.

Chapter 7: History's Verdict

Munich greeted Elizabeth with a piercing wind that seemed to blow not from the Alps, but straight from the last century. She sat in the reading room of the state archives, where the silence was so dense that the rustle of turning pages sounded like a gunshot. Before her lay not just yellowed documents, but an anatomical atlas of hatred.

Her investigation, which began with personal tragedies in Japan and the United States, had led her here, to the heart of Europe, to the origins of a mechanism that had, for decades, shattered the lives of people like Akemi, Toru Goto, and Kenji. Elizabeth was searching for an answer: where did this method come from? Who first conceived the idea that faith could be treated like a disease, and dissent excised like a tumor?

The answer lay in a folder labeled "1930s." The architect of this system was Walter Künneth.

The Shadow of the Theologian

To most contemporaries, the name meant little. But the documents Elizabeth translated from German painted the portrait of a man whose intellectual legacy proved more dangerous than many weapons. Künneth was a Lutheran theologian, a respected academic who, during the Weimar Republic, began what appeared to be an innocent endeavor, the defense of traditional faith.

In 1921, the Apologetic Center (Apologetischen Centrale) was established under the Protestant Church. By 1932, Künneth had taken

its helm, transforming a modest office into a powerful analytical apparatus. Elizabeth read the Center's reports and saw painfully familiar patterns. They did not debate their opponents. They compiled lists.

“Blacklists” of so-called “sects of Germany.”

Elizabeth ran her finger along the lines of an archival document. Künneth's methodology was simple—and chilling in its effectiveness. He shifted the focus from theology to sociology and politics. Small religious groups were declared not merely “deluded,” but “alien elements” threatening the integrity of the nation (Volk).

In May 1933, as the Nazis consolidated their power, Künneth, together with Hans Lilje and Martin Niemöller, founded the “Young Reformation Movement.” That same year, under his editorship, the anthology *The Nation Before God* (*Die Nation vor Gott*) was published. Elizabeth opened a copy. The text was saturated with rhetoric that today would be recognized as extremism, but at the time was presented as patriotism. Künneth wrote about the supremacy of the Führer, the principle of obedience, and—most critically—the need to purge the nation of “racially and spiritually alien” elements.

The Apologetic Center became a laboratory for manufacturing enemies. They compiled dossiers, built archives, and analyzed the literature of “sects”—not to understand, but to find incriminating material. Facts were distorted, quotations taken out of context, and hypothetical threats constructed.

Elizabeth was struck by how closely this mirrored the work of modern “experts” such as Steven or the lawyers of the Japanese>NNLSS network. The same methods: dehumanization, the construction of a

hidden threat, accusations of anti-state activity. Only then it was called the defense of the “German spirit”, now it is framed as the protection of “mental health” or the “public good.”

Heydrich’s Directive

The next document sent a chill through Elizabeth. It was a copy of a directive signed by Reinhard Heydrich, head of internal security in Nazi Germany—known as Nuremberg Document D-59.

The text was dry, bureaucratic—and lethal:

“...Measures will be taken immediately against... organizations, clubs, associations, and circles... All organizations... are to be dissolved and banned; existing materials... will be confiscated... Persons initiated into secret teachings... are to be arrested... In every case, they are to be sent to a concentration camp...”

Elizabeth saw a **direct line**. Künne’s center had prepared the ground. It provided ideological justification. It explained to society and the state *why* these people were dangerous. And then the Gestapo and the SD implemented it.

Theological polemic had turned into a police operation. Lists of “sects,” compiled by church apologists, ended up on the desks of executioners in black uniforms.

“This is not religion—it is politics,” Elizabeth wrote in her notebook. Künne and his followers used fear of “sectarianism” as a tool of social unification. Any difference—any otherness—was treated as betrayal.

The Yellow Star and the “Cultist” Label

Reflecting on the documents, Elizabeth realized that the mechanism of stigmatization is universal. The Nazis used yellow stars to mark Jews, visually separating them from “normal” citizens. It was the first step toward dehumanization. A person wearing a yellow star ceased to be a neighbor, a doctor, or a musician. They became a “Jew”—a category marked for elimination.

The modern anti-cult movement—a direct ideological descendant of Künneth’s framework—has created its own “yellow star.” It is invisible, but no less destructive. It is the label “cultist” or “sectarian.”

Elizabeth recalled Akemi’s eyes as she spoke of her son, bullied at school. She thought of Toru Goto, whose twelve years of confinement were justified by the simple fact that he was a “cult member.” The label works the same way: it disables empathy. Society does not sympathize with a “cultist.” Society assumes that the “cultist” is either to blame or not a subject of rights at all.

In her notes, Elizabeth drew a line from Künneth to the present day. That line did not end in 1945. The ideology survived. It exchanged uniforms for business suits—and racial theory for pseudo-psychology.

The Virus Mutates: FECRIS and the Global Network

After the war, Walter Künneth continued his career, becoming an influential theologian. But his methods found new adherents. Elizabeth found information about Pastor Friedrich Haak, who in the 1970s effectively revived the methodology of the Apologetic Center. Haak was the one who passed the torch to a new generation of activists against “youth religions.”

It was on this foundation that FECRIS (the European Federation of Centers for Research and Information on Sectarianism) was built. The organization, funded in part by government grants (particularly in France), became the ideological headquarters of modern anti-cultism.

Elizabeth studied the structure of this network. It resembled an octopus. In Russia, Alexander Dvorkin became a key figure, heading the Expert Council for State Religious Studies Expertise in 2009. Elizabeth found evidence that Dvorkin had not merely borrowed the rhetoric of his Western colleagues, but had radicalized it further. His term “totalitarian sect” had no scientific definition, but became a legal bludgeon.

The story of Alexander Sizikov, a blind Muslim arrested in Crimea in 2020, became for Elizabeth an illustration of the system’s complete absurdity. The man was accused of terrorism for possessing books that he was physically unable to read. The psychiatric evaluation ordered for him was a direct echo of Soviet punitive psychiatry, but its ideological justification was provided by modern anti-cultists.

“They create a reality in which an innocent person becomes a criminal simply by virtue of their faith,” Elizabeth thought.

She saw how this virus was spreading. In China, the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners had reached staggering proportions, even extending to allegations of forced organ harvesting. And although the scale of repression in China and Europe was not comparable, the root was the same: the state assumed the right to decide what people should believe, relying on the “expertise” of aligned anti-cult activists.

The Fourth Reich in People’s Minds

The most terrifying revelation for Elizabeth was the realization that modern society, proud of its tolerance, had readily embraced this new form of fascism.

Anti-cultism had become “acceptable hatred.” In a world where discrimination based on race or gender is prohibited, religious minorities remained the only group that could be openly and legally targeted.

Elizabeth was reviewing materials on the Shinzo Abe case. The killer, Tetsuya Yamagami, was a product of this media environment. He wasn’t born hating the Unification Church. That hatred was instilled in him. For years, the media, lawyers, and “experts” had constructed the image of a monster. Yamagami simply pulled the trigger, but others had taken aim.

And the reaction of Japanese society confirmed the diagnosis. Instead of condemning the violence, society accepted the killer’s logic. “If he killed out of resentment toward the church, then the church is to blame.” This was the logic of a pogrom. The logic of Kristallnacht.

Elizabeth realized that the term “Fourth Reich” does not necessarily mean marching columns with swastikas. It is a state of mind. It is society’s willingness to sacrifice the freedom of a minority for the sake of the majority’s illusory peace. It is the belief that an “expert” (be it Künne, Haak, or Dvorkin) knows better what is going on in a person’s soul than the person themselves.

A Defense Mechanism that Became a Threat

In her final draft, Elizabeth wrote quickly, afraid of losing her train of thought.

“We created a system to protect against ‘brainwashing’ that itself became a gigantic brainwashing machine. We were so afraid that someone would steal our children’s free will that we handed that freedom over to the state and psychiatrists.”

She recalled the financial reports of Japanese deprogrammers. Millions of dollars made from parents’ fear. It was an industry. And like any industry, it needed raw material. The raw material was people. For the business to thrive, it needed new “scary cults,” new threats, new waves of media panic. If there was no threat, it would be created. Peaceful communities were declared extremist. Books were equated with weapons. Prayer was labeled a form of hypnosis.

Elizabeth saw a tragic irony in this. Walter Kunneth fought for the “purity of the nation,” but led Germany to moral ruin. Modern anti-cultists fight for “individual freedom,” but use the methods of the Gestapo and the Stasi: surveillance, denunciations, abductions, and forced treatment.

The Right to Make a Mistake

On the last day of her stay in Munich, Elizabeth went to the English Garden. She needed to see the sky, unobstructed by the archive’s shelves. She thought about the verdict. What judgment would history pass on this era?

The central thesis of her book was fully confirmed. The true tragedy lay not in the doctrines of the new religions—however strange they might seem to the traditional view. The tragedy lay in the methods used to combat them.

Democracy is not a mechanism that sorts people into those with “right” and “wrong” beliefs. Democracy is freedom of conscience: the right to choose one’s faith, worldview, and community without the state passing spiritual judgments on behalf of the individual. As soon as the government begins to “save” citizens from their own beliefs by force—under the pretext of care, morality, or “combating sects”—it ceases to be democratic and turns into a system of enforced ideological correctness

“Freedom of conscience is absolute, or it is nothing at all,” whispered Elizabeth. You can’t be “a little free.” If today we allow “Moonies” to be kidnapped, tomorrow they’ll come for the Pentecostals, the day after tomorrow for the Muslims, and then for everyone. The mechanism of repression is universal. It doesn’t care who it crushes.

Epilogue to the Investigation

Elizabeth returned to the hotel and opened her laptop. She had only the final lines left to write. She didn’t want to end the book on a note of hopelessness. History knows of instances when the truth breaks through the concrete of propaganda. The Nuremberg trials condemned not only people but also the ideology of Nazism. Perhaps the time has come for a new trial—a trial of the ideology of intolerance that hides behind a mask of concern.

She remembered Akemi, who, despite all the horrors, retained the ability to love. She remembered Kenji, who, having lost everything, did not become embittered. She remembered Toru Goto, who emerged from 12 years of confinement not broken, but full of determination to seek justice.

These people possessed a strength that neither Künne, nor Steven Hassan, nor the NNLSS lawyers could have anticipated. The strength of the human spirit, which cannot be programmed or deprogrammed. The spirit breathes where it will. And no walls, no Heydrich directives, or Tokyo court rulings can stop the wind from blowing.

Elizabeth typed the final period. But she knew that in reality, the matter was not yet settled. The battle continues. And the front line runs not through courtrooms, but through the heart of everyone who decides: to walk by when a neighbor is called a “sectarian,” or to reach out a hand to them.

She closed the lid of her laptop. Dawn was breaking outside the window. A new day in old Europe, which has seen too many Inquisition bonfires and gas chambers to allow itself to forget where it all begins.

It all begins with words. With a label. With the silent consent of the majority that someone nearby is a “subhuman.”

Elizabeth packed her things. In her suitcase lay a manuscript that was meant to serve as a mirror for society. A mirror that is terrifying to look into, but necessary. Because only by seeing the features of an executioner in the reflection of the “savior” can one stop the mechanism set in motion nearly a century ago in the study of a German theologian.

She left the hotel. The city was waking up. People were rushing to work, drinking coffee, laughing. They didn’t know that right now, at this very moment, somewhere in the world behind closed doors, someone was breaking someone else’s will in the name of their peace. But now she knew this. And soon they would know it too. The chains of salvation must be broken. Otherwise, they will suffocate everyone.

The morning paper was still lying on the table in the lobby. The front page carried a headline about new security measures. Elizabeth could only smile bitterly. Security is an illusion. Freedom is a risk. And history teaches us that those who trade freedom for security ultimately lose both, left standing on the ruins of their own humanity with a yellow star on their sleeve that they have sewn onto themselves.